

Choosing What To Think

Dakota Jones

Galen Strawson argues that mental action is mostly limited to cases of shepherding the mind; merely preparatory movements in hopes of trying to make other things happen: you can pull your focus back on task after getting distracted; you can clear your mental slate. However, you cannot actively think, judge, believe, or choose. His arguments come to the conclusion that most of what happens in our head is purely mental ballistics; one can point the mind in a direction and pull the trigger, but after that, one isn't in control at all. This paper will only discuss one of the mental events Strawson believes is passive: thought.

I have the intuition that when I intend to think some thought and then subsequently have an instance of that thought content roll across my mental ticker tape, the thinking of that thought has risen to the level of action. Strawson gives what could reasonably be construed as a regress argument against the possibility of actively having some thought. In this paper I will show that we can stop the regress from getting off the ground and rescue the intuition that one can actively think about some content. Though a lot of theories of mental action, concepts, and intention will have to deny that entertaining any particular thought content is an action, I will argue that not all do. My intuition that I have some thoughts actively is strong — strong enough that I believe that it puts significant pressure on a theorist to move away from those theories that cannot account for it. I will begin by laying some groundwork on the relationship between thought, action, and intention. Next, I will present Strawson's argument and show how one need not accept his conclusion.

I will be assuming in this paper that any action will be preceded by an intention to commit that action. This was first argued for by Donald Davidson (1980; Wilson, Shpall, and Piñeros Glasscock 2016) It is exactly my intention to walk the dog that causes the action of walking the dog. The important bit is that I am not necessarily committing to the casualist picture. I do not think that some intention needs to cause an action for my account to be successful, only that some mental action be preceded by some mental state. Like Strawson, I explain the causal relationship between the mind and action by way of intentional states. But I believe his argument and my retort both generalize if you take an action to be caused by a belief/desire pair rather than an intention. I also must assume that an intention is a mental state which has the propositional structure and some content. I will use the form $I(\Phi)$, where Φ is some action, to represent that propositional structure. For example: If Mr. Jefferson has the intention to build Monticello, he has the mental state: **I(Build Monticello)**

Section 1: The Regress

Strawson paints a detailed picture of which mental movements are active and which ones are passive. In a specific case, he argues that the production of a particular thought cannot ever be a matter of action. He gives a couple of examples in which one might actively have a particular thought content:

1. Mr. Jefferson says, "I am now going to think 'grass is green,'" then has the thought "grass is green."
2. Mr. Jefferson says, "I am going to have a random thought," and then has the thought "Swifts live their lives on the wing."

By Strawson's lights, both of these cases fail to serve as examples of action. I am going to argue that his problem with both of these examples should be understood as a regress argument. Specifically, I think it can be understood as saying that one can never actively think any specific content because that content must first exist in some mental state (intention) prior to the thought. Because the content must factor into some prior mental state in order to cause it, he argues that the intention itself must be active:

In this case a comprehending entertaining of grass is green has already occurred previously—it has already been held in mind as an intended object of thought. Another event of (particularly emphatic) comprehending entertaining is then brought about by one's doing something of the priming or catalytic kind" (Strawson 2003).

I take the intuition here to be that when one has a thought, for the thought to be active, one must have had the prior intention to form that thought. The content of the intention is also identical to the content of the thought that precedes it.

Following this train of thought, an intention can't be formed passively if it is to be anything like what we think intentions are. Since, if intentions were passive and simultaneously caused actions, that would seemingly rid us of our intuition that actions were things we decided to do. Well, then our intention formation must be deliberate, active. But here we run into the regress. If **I(think "grass is green")** is an action itself, then it would require the intention **I(I(think "grass is green"))**; however, now that intention requires an intention... and so on and so forth. Again, Strawson argues: "It cannot be a matter of action unless the content is already there, available for consideration and adoption for intentional production. But if it is already there to be with considered and adopted it must already have 'just come' at some previous time in order to be so available" (Strawson 2003, 235). Because intentions have the form I(C) where C is some content. The intention to think "grass is green" is just a mental state with the content "grass is green." That is, you can only form the intention if you are already thinking of the content, but if you are already considering the content, then you cannot think of it actively—since it must already be there for you to even consider it for intentional production to think it actively. So to have the thought actively, one must have had the intention actively, but the intention cannot be active without producing the regress.

Here is what I take to be Strawson's argument in premise form:

1. Suppose I actively think a thought with content C
2. I actively Φ only if my Φ -ing is caused by a prior intention to Φ .
3. My thinking a thought with content C is caused by a prior intention to think a thought with content C
4. An intention to think a thought with content C is a thought with content C
5. The intention cannot be active on pain of regress.
6. So the intention must be passive.
7. So the first mental state with the content C was passive.

We have assumed 1 and 2. And I have taken it that I have shown how 4 and 5 function in Strawson's argument. The conclusion that we can draw from this is that we can never actively have a particular thought—that is, I cannot decide to think about a certain sentence or about a particular concept. If I can never have a particular thought actively, I would have a much less active mental life compared to how I view and experience my mental life. That said, Strawson has the opposite intuition, explicitly stating that he does feel that very much of our mental life is active at all.

It is worth noting, Strawson's regress doesn't apply to all action—only cases where the content of the intention and the content of the thought are identical. For example, **I(swing the baseball bat)** causing the swinging of the baseball bat does not permit such a regress, since the concept of swinging the baseball bat and the actual swinging of the baseball bat are not identical. Since no regress occurs, the movement of the baseball bat, unlike the comprehending of the thought, need not be passive. In conclusion, since you must have already had the content in mind to produce the intention to think about said content, there is no way the thought could be active, without producing a regress. This is also the case for other mental states. For example, belief and desire do not face the problem at hand since, while intending to think C is a case of thinking C, intending to believe C, is not a case of believing C. It is purely intending to think some particular thought or another that the problem of regress plagues.

Section 2: Immediate and Reflective Senses

. I plan on rejecting the third premise of the above argument. I think there is a view of concepts that binds well with our intuitions of the stream of consciousness as well as how concepts function in our mental space. The view I'll present relies on a distinction between different features of our concepts. Mental states have senses, semantic features that specify how the subject with the mental states conceives of the object of the state. Said otherwise, the reference is the intentional object of the mental state¹. This is opposed to the reference of the mental states which is the object that the mental state is about. Say you have the thought that "My computer chair is a bit wobbly." The reference of that mental that, the object of intention, is the actual object which is your computer chair. While the sense is how you are framing that object. A similar distinction holds with regard

¹ It should be noted here there is an overlap in terminology. Intention as meaning 'the action one is planning to do' was used in the first section. While in this section, the intention is what a mental state, or more any representation, is about.

to concepts. There is the intentional object that the concept is meant to represent — reference. And there is how exactly it is represented — Sense.

There is good reason to think that the concepts we use on a day to day basis differ in content from what might be included on a substantive reflection of said concept. Angela Mendolovici distinction between immediate and reflective senses embodies this idea. David Bourget (2017) gives the example of the conceptual representation of numbers. If asked to multiply 100×7 you might be able to vary quickly give the answer of 700. But if you were asked to multiply the 111×1111100100 , you would have a much harder time, even though this question is representing the same numbers as before, just in base 2. This is seemingly because the visual representation makes the problem especially apparent. I know that often when multiplying numbers that are some multiple of ten I add zeros to the end of the number being multiplied as a shortcut. Both Bourget and Mendolovici both agree this is because we are often not working with the full concept of the number but merely the numerical representation of the number. That is not to say that one couldn't use the whole concept but retrieval of some deep properties not represented in the numerical sign might not be necessary every time one uses the concept. I will return to some of the other ways in which this distinction aligns with other intuitions and evidence towards the end of this paper. For now, I will take it that the distinction accurately describes two ways in which concepts can be used and perceived.

Mendolovici's account of immediate and reflective senses relies on phenomenal intentionality theory. In her account these senses are couched completely in terms of phenomenal consciousness. And each phenomenal state is individuated with respect to an immediate sense: "thoughts with the same immediate senses have the same phenomenal characters and thoughts with the same phenomenal characters have the same immediate senses" (Mendolovici 2019, 18) While it is the distinction between the senses and not any specific account of them that is important to overcoming Strawson's argument, it might be worthwhile to understand how the distinction functions with regard to different kinds of thoughts. So even with concepts with rigid definitions, often we are not conceiving of the definition as we use the concept. Mendolovici considers a concept like supervenience to have a rigid definition but in a case where one has the thought "the mental supervenes on the physical" it is not this definitional sense that runs through your head when you have that thought. It is merely "a schematic, gist-like, or partial grasp of the definition of supervenience (e.g., an abstract idea of some kind of logical dependence), or simple or sui generis contents" (Mendolovici 2019, 7). The same goes for a case where there is no rigid definition but use a prototype, exemplar, or theory to conceive of the concept. In this case of those objects, when you use the concept bird you are often not considering the prototype, exemplar, or theory of that concept. But just a just a conception that fits your immediate needs. In the case of a prototype concept you are often not conceiving of an actual prototype of a bird when you use that concept. Only upon reflection is that prototype apparent.

Now it is easy to see where our version of strawson's argument goes awry. If there truly are two ways in which to perceive the same concept, then it is not true that the content of the intention is token identical to the content of the thought that it causes. According to this picture there is a 'working' sense of the concept, the

immediate sense, that factors into can factor into the intention. While the reflective sense of a concept is what appears before one's mind when one intends to think about something or another. If the content of the intention and the thoughts ones intends to think are not identical, the regress does not get started, just like in the case of overt action or other mental states. Meaning, you can choose what to think as long as the entire concept is not held within the mind at the time the intention is formed.

This might sound initially like a restriction on how one can think a particular thought but I would like to argue that this is simply how we choose what to think about. Often internally, the full concept of a particular thought is not all the way 'built out.' When I remind myself to go to the store say, not the entirety of my concept of 'store' runs through my head as I say the sentence. Even more, not enough of my concept of store runs through my head to actually be a determinate description of the reference of my use of store. This happens generally in that one need not use the whole concept, or even enough to determine its reference, when they think or talk. What is being used here are immediate senses. Were I to consider the concept or sentence longer, I could unpack the immediate sense, revealing the reflective sense. Consider a case where a word has been in your lexicon for years. You use it often, and correctly. But when someone asks you the definition and it takes you a while to think of something. I think this is one case in particular that shows you often aren't using the entire concept, as if you were, it shouldn't be a problem to produce a satisfactory definition of that concept. However, since you only use the immediate sense often, it might take you some time to consider the reflective sense, and how to come up with a satisfactory definition.

So I think it is not only plausible but intuitive that in a case where you wanted to reflect on a specific thought, you would use the immediate sense when you formed the intuition with the goal of drawing the reflective sense to the foreground of thought. And in this case, I think it would be considered an active case of what Strawson calls a comprehending entertaining of some content.

Section 3: Intention and Description

There is one particular issue with this view of the relationship between intention and eventual thought. If the intention has one content, how can it be the case that it causes a thought with a different content. When I form the intention to swing the bat, I do just that, not something different. Wherein our example of forming the intention that only satisfies a limited description of the eventual thought. This is the form of many of the basic problems with the causal theory of action. Namely, if you intend to do something that meets one description, under what other descriptions are the consequences still intentional. Consider the case where you intend to flip a switch, call this a basic action. What happens is that you turn on the light. But it would not be false to say that you intended to turn on the light. In fact that was your main goal of flipping the switch, it is not a basic action but it is an intentional action. However, what about the case where you alert an intruder in your home by turning on the light. Obviously this is the case where the consequence of some basic action, flipping the switch, was not an intentional action. While Davidson thought that "any we do is our action if it is intentional under

any one description” others have been much less, liberal in how they drawn the line between action (e.i. intentional action) and mere passive movement. (Davidson 1963; McCullagh 1975, 207)

In our case we need a way for an intention of one description to cause the production of an action with a different description. Namely, I (Think X) where X is the immediate sense of some concept to actually produce the thought Y where Y is the reflective sense of the same concept. But I do not think this causes much of an issue given that we have assumed that the structure of these concepts lends itself to exactly this immediate/reflective connection. Here I think it is important to remember that while the immediate sense of a concept and the reflective sense of a concept may differ they have the same reference, no matter the specificity of the senses themselves. And in this way, we connect the intentional production of the immediate sense with the eventual thought that contains the reflective sense. Say both I and you might consider Arnold Schwarzenegger. We both might have very different conceptions of Arnold Schwarzenegger in that you think of him as a governor and actor while I think of him as a retired bodybuilder. We are obviously thinking of the same person under different descriptions. And in this way the intention to think X and the later thinking of Y are different descriptions of the same object. Both senses are about the same object, a concept in this case, The intention to think about that object, picking it out in the intention by use of the immediate sense, is still ultimately intentional because it is concerning the very same object that the reflective sense is. Though the content is not identical, the intention to think can cause the following thought.

Section 4: Conclusion

I think a charitable account of Strawson’s argument has been presented. Though the argument is strong, I do not think that necessarily shows that we cannot actively think about some particular content or other. Given our plausible distinction between immediate and reflective senses, his regress never gets off the ground. Further, it is plausible that the causal relationship between the intention and the following thought can be maintained since both senses concern the very same object of thought, the specific concept. If this is all true, then it is perfectly possible that reflecting on some thought can be active. Said differently, you can choose what to think.

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